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THE RELATION OF MORALITY TO RELIGION

What is the relation of morality to religion? If morality can exist apart from religion, that is, apart from belief in God, then the only claim that the Church has upon man, is the claim which any venerable and ancient society may have upon our allegiance and support. The Church might still offer her members certain advantages which would make it worth while entering her fold. But it is difficult to see how this would differ materially from the advantages of a Masonic lodge or a social club. It is agreed, even by unbelievers, that religion cannot be divorced from morality. But is the reverse as widely and universally admitted; viz., that morality can never be divorced from religion?

It is remarkable the unanimity with which Christians and non-Christians are agreed that every article of the Creed, every ordinance of the Church,—every act of devotion, should contribute to the building up of Christian character, and that the only possible justification for the Church's existence is as a moral and spiritual force which makes for righteousness in the individual and in the state. But men are far from being agreed that one who lives a morally correct life must be a member of some body of organized Christians. In fact, the relation of morality to religion is not clearly understood, either by Christians themselves or by those who profess to be able to live a virtuous life apart from religious sanctions. The question we are considering, lies at the bottom of nearly all the popular objections that one hears against the Church and Creeds and unless we have some very clear and definite views regarding it, we shall be apt to be hazy and confused upon a good many other points which lie merely upon the surface.

What gives a certain opportuneness and timeliness to the present discussion is the publication of a book entitled "The Religion of Duty" by Professor Felix Adler of New York. Those who know of Professor Adler and his work, know that he is the founder and head of a society calling itself the "Ethical Culture Society" of New York City. The object of the Society, to quote

the words of its founder, is "to hold up before men ideals of Conduct which are competent to give power to the will and peace to the heart." "We are agreed," continues Professor Adler, "that the attempt to live in right relations, to realize what is called righteousness, to approximate toward the ideal of holiness is that which alone gives worth to human life." These are noble words, and breathe the spirit of Christ himself.

It is impossible not to sympathize with so high and lofty an aim. Indeed, in the end which he has set out to accomplish, it would be difficult to distinguish between the object which the Ethical Culture Society has in view and that which the Christian Churches have placed before them as the great end and goal of human endeavor. It may be admitted for the sake of argument, that the Church and the Ethical Culture Society are both striving for the same thing; viz., an "ideal of holiness," which alone gives value and sacredness to human life. We may even go further and say that the ethical standards of Professor Adler and his followers are the ethical standards of Christ Himself. They are not pagan nor Jewish nor Oriental, but Christ's own teachings and principles. With a literalness and loyalty which would put many orthodox Christians to the blush, Professor Adler accepts Christ's teachings concerning marriage and divorce, concerning the right use of wealth, and the duty of loving one's enemies. So far as his ethical teaching goes it is Christian through and through, but we part company with him in his attitude towards all forms of organized Christianity.

Now, the significance of this school of ethical culturists is that it represents an attempt on the part of some of the truest and noblest spirits of our time to find a basis for morals apart from belief in God. We prefer to say apart from belief in God, rather than apart from religious sanctions, because, as we shall point out later, Professor Adler proposes to teach "a religion of morality." In fact his society has many of the marks of a religious organization. It supports a Sunday School, it has a service for the burial of the dead, and one for the consecration of the marriage bond, and its members meet together weekly to hear addresses from their leader on matters of daily life and conduct. If they have a creed at all, it may be summed up in these three

propositions which are set forth as the belief of their founder, though he does not wish to impose them upon others as a condition of membership in his society.

First, Professor Adler believes with Matthew Arnold in a "Power which makes for Righteousness." From a study of the inexorable workings of natural laws, from the dictates of one's own conscience, and from the ethical experience of the race as seen in the slow progress and upbuilding of human institutions and customs, it is clear that there is a "Power," a "Something" at work in the world and in the lives of men that is on the side of righteousness. That this Power is at work, and that on the whole it has proved itself stronger than the opposite principle of evil and of darkness is a matter of *experience*. Not only is it at present achieving victories and proving itself the strongest Power at work in human society, but it is working with a purpose. "Yes," says Professor Adler, "with a sublime purpose" towards which the whole creation moves, and that ultimately this purpose or plan of goodness will be realized in a regenerated and redeemed society.

Of course, one might stop here to interpose an objection, and to ask how is it possible to disassociate an infinite and sublime purpose from a Purposer, that is, from some form of intelligence which conceives this great and wonderful plan, and contrives, with infinite skill and wisdom, to make all things, good and evil alike, work towards its accomplishment? One might go still farther and ask how can moral qualities be attributed to a Power at all? Can an impersonal energy be said to be righteous? Can we conceive of righteousness apart from personality? And, therefore, do we not mean substantially the same thing when we speak of a Power working intelligently for righteousness and a God who consciously and freely chooses the good and is Himself the embodiment of His own righteous and just laws? In other words, Professor Adler believes in a religion without God and in Christianity without the divine Christ. One cannot help but be reminded of those Athenians who erected in Athens an altar to the "Unknown God." All that is lacking is the right name inscribed upon it. He whom men ignorantly worship, and whose Presence and Power they acknowledge under other names

and forms, Him, declares the Christian Apostle, have we been commissioned to set forth Lord of all.

But we are not concerned now with what may be thought of the illogical and unphilosophical position of those who represent the society for Ethical Culture, but with the view which they advance that a basis for morality can be found apart from faith in God. We mean apart from faith in a Personal God, because a Power of Righteousness which cannot be worshipped, which cannot be loved and sought for in prayer and in the hour of fierce temptation cannot be said to exercise any appreciable influence over one's life. Such a Power cannot be called God at all. For we are forbidden to think of Him as personal or in any sense anthropomorphic. We may not pray to such a God, because He is a Power. We may not love Him because He is Impersonal. And yet, paradoxical as it may seem, Professor Adler believes that morality cannot exist apart from a certain sort of religion. In seeking to find some basis of religious sanction for his system of morals, he finds it in the awfulness, the sublimity, the majesty of the Moral law viewed in its "Cosmic aspect." When we do a noble or unselfish deed, we should comfort ourselves with the reflection that "we are helping on or retarding a world-wide process." But such is the logic of the argument and such the imperative need of the human heart that the Founder of the Ethical Culture Society is reduced to the necessity of inventing a new system of religion — "The Religion of Duty." Could there be greater proof of the impossibility of separating morality from religion than this admission of Professor Adler?

When we say that morality cannot exist apart from religious sanctions, we do not mean to deny that certain individuals living in a christian society may not attain to a high degree of virtue without any conscious faith or dependence upon God. Every one can call to mind one or more persons of blameless lives and of the most incorruptible integrity of character, who are not numbered among the professed followers of Christ. Such individuals standing apart from the Churches prove nothing. But when one can point us to a godless society, a society without a church, a community without faith in God and without prayer in which such characters are produced, then the argument from

the moral man, outside of the Churches, will have some force. But as long as we have a Christian community, dominated by Christian ideals of life, and men and women born in Christian homes and brought up to accept Christian standards of living, it is clearly impossible to say how much of any man's morality, he owes to the influence of Christianity in the world, and how much to the force and energy of his own will.

But let the attempt be made to take Christ out of Christian civilization, to take God out of religion, banish from the world belief in a Personal God, all loving, all wise, and all Holy, and what would become of morality? This is the issue which the advocates of a system of ethics without religion must face. Many a man and woman who to-day may be living noble and unselfish lives apart from faith in Christ, are supported and sustained in their striving after moral ideals to an extent that they do not begin to appreciate by the Christian Churches which they have repudiated. "The consciousness of the moral law cannot be separated," says Professor Watson, "from the consciousness of God without losing its power and authority." What gives finality and absoluteness to the Command "Thou shalt not steal" is the belief that this is a Command of God as well as a dictate of our own conscience. The note of authority in morality is based upon the conviction that the moral law is not simply conformity to custom or precedent or social conventions, but it is a part of the divine order, nature and constitution of the Universe. It is the expression of a divine and immutable will. Man's morality therefore is of a piece with God's. Human justice is of the same sort as divine justice. Human love is but a reflection of Divine love. Human goodness is but the image and superscription of the goodness and Holiness of God. Once let the idea find lodgment in the minds of men that human goodness is something different from the goodness and character of God, and you have knocked the props from under morality, and made it the mere creation of man's whim and fancy. John Stuart Mill spoke wiser than he knew, when he said, "I refuse to believe in a God who is not good in the same sense I understand a man to be good." And any attempt to separate between the morality of man and of God leads logically to infidelity on the one hand, and

to a standard of morals on the other which will be as variable as a weather vane.

What, we may ask, will be the effect upon character of one who believes that morality can be separated from belief in God? Why, briefly this: Such a man will tend inevitably to rise or fall with the level of those about him. He has got no absolute standard of right to which to hold fast amid the shifting and changing customs and opinions of men. If he enters business life, he will inevitably adopt the ethical standards of the trade. If he enters social life, he will make its social standards and conventionalities his own. With a chameleon-like rapidity he will reflect the color and moral sentiments of those with whom he is thrown. If he accepts Professor Adler's position, he may believe in the majesty and sublimity of the moral law, and so may escape the insecurity and instability of the attitude of mind to which we have just referred.

But even if one holds to a Power which makes for righteousness, how can he be sure that this impersonal energy will ultimately triumph? How can he say that all things work together for good towards one great divine end and purpose? How can he become a co-worker with this Power of Righteousness unless he conceives of it as working according to some plan? And if he admits that the whole creation is moving towards some ultimate goal and purpose, how can he dissociate such a sublime and beneficent Purpose from some form of Personality? And if this divine Purposer and Architect is personal, why should he hesitate to fall down and worship Him as God? And in such worshipful reverence and dependence come to believe that this God whose nature is love, whose law is righteousness, whose will eternally chooses the good, whose presence fills the Universe, that this God may come to him in his struggles and strivings after the ideal, and strengthen the human will, fill the soul with good desires, and give to man the ennobling and inspiring consciousness that in trying to live the highest moral life of which he is capable he is really working with God in the carrying out of His divine plan and purpose.

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